

Sue Jackson

President, Master, Distinguished Governor, Graduates and Graduands,
Guests, and Colleagues:

Today, I have the delightful task of welcoming Professor Sue Jackson as a Fellow of Birkbeck, in gratitude for her extraordinary dedication to our college and its unique mission.

In the 1980s, when Sue Jackson was juggling paid work and childcare, in addition to doing a degree in gender studies, one of her favourite poets, Audre Lorde published "Stations". In the poem, women wait at train stations. Some stanzas go like this:

Some women love

to wait

for life for a ring

in the June light for a touch....

Some women wait for their right
train in the wrong station....

Some women wait for love
to rise up
the child of their promise....

Some women wait for themselves
around the next corner
and call the empty spot peace...

Some women wait for something
to change and nothing
does change
so they change
themselves.

These were the lines I thought of when reading the work of Jackson and speaking to her colleagues. Like Lorde's women who wait at train stations, waiting for the perfect lover, the softest caress, the scent of a new-born's skin, waiting to find themselves: Jackson understands what it means to be a woman waiting for change. But, like the woman in the final stanza, when "nothing does change", she performs her own actions. As the philosopher Judith Butler explained, identity – selfhood – does not prefigure action, but is constituted through actions and words. Jackson is a woman who acts: in so doing, she has not only transformed her own life but has done more than anyone at Birkbeck in recent years to ensure that our students thrive.

Who is Jackson? She grew up in a working-class Jewish family in the East End, and, at the age of 15, left school to take a secretarial course. She married and had children before striking off on her own path. In 1980, Jackson became a mature student. The Open University gave her an opportunity to expand her horizons via distance learning. These were heady days for women's studies. It is no wonder she became quickly hooked, completing a Masters in the field and then a PhD in women and education.

It wasn't until 2001 that she joined us at Birkbeck as a Lecturer in Lifelong Learning and Citizenship in the School of Social and Natural Sciences. By 2005, she was Head of School in the Faculty of Continuing Education and Director of the Institute for Lifelong Learning. They promoted her to Senior Lecturer. Two years later, her achievements led to a Chair in Lifelong Learning and Gender within the School of Continuing Education and two years after that she joined the School of Social Sciences, History, and Philosophy and became Pro-Vice Master for Learning and Teaching. By any definition, it was a spectacular rise.

What has marked Jackson as special is her commitment to feminism and to social and political critique. In a book entitled Reconceptualising Lifelong Learning. Feminist Interventions, Jackson along with her co-author Penny Jane Burke (now at the University of Newcastle in Australia), stated:

We aim to broaden what counts as learning and who counts as a learner and to offer different understandings of lifelong

learning that are able to include currently marginalised and misrecognised values, epistemologies and principles.

This succinct, powerful statement summarises her goals since she entered the academy, and, of course, it makes Birkbeck the perfect place for her to work. After all, Birkbeck was established in 1823 precisely to offer the highest level of education to working people and seven years later, it was amongst the first institutions of Higher Education in this country to accept female students. This is a home for someone like Jackson. She is passionate not only of the challenges faced by “non-traditional” students, but also what they bring and contribute to the academy.

As part of her mission, Jackson takes ethical philosophy and practice very seriously indeed. Like many of us in this room, she admits to having struggled with part-time paid work, homecare, and mothering, lamenting that fact that university structures and strictures can be “isolating, individualised and certainly non-feminist”. Recognising that universities often fail women by assuming that an academic paradigm

modelled on men will suit them, she sets out to show (as she explained in her book Differently Academic?) that women's studies and feminism

have key roles to play in the lifelong learning agenda, embedding it into the academic context, and re-turning the academy towards women.

Crucially, she shows, it is an agenda that benefits everybody, of whatever of the many genders we self-identify with.

In today's highly neo-liberal academic environment, she asks whether it is possible to move away from a vision of lifelong learning that is an "agent of social control" to one where it is an "agent for change and transformative action". In answering this question, Jackson has been influenced by thinkers such as Michel Foucault, Julia Kristeva, and Judith Butler, but also the work of radical feminists like Mary Daly, Alice Walker, Adrienne Rich, bell hooks, and, of course, Aubrey Lord, the author of "Stations". These writers share a critique of language and also of learning as an active process for both learners and teachers: it is a performance, as philosopher Judith Butler would have it.

In order to make a difference, a person can't shy away from challenging jobs. Jackson has done many. She has worked as an expert advisor in adult continuing education and lifelong learning for the British Council's "Development Partnerships in Higher Education programme" and was the UK representative at the UNESCO-based World Committee for Lifelong Learning. She has served on the Executive of the Universities Association for Lifelong Learning; and, at the Higher Education Funding Council for England has been (at various times) a member of the Teaching Fund Advisory Group as well as their Teaching, Quality and Student Experience Strategic Committee. She has been on the editorial boards of Teaching in Higher Education and the Women's Studies International Forum.

This bland list of achievements fails to capture "the woman". Jackson is devoted to her family; is a marvellous hostess; and is known for her elegance on the dance floor. She has frequently served as a "peacemaker" and collaborator. I have spoken to many of her colleagues, who gush unashamedly about her "dignified calm" and "wry slow smiles and brief laughs of agreement". Some were struck by

postcards of the match-girls' strikes and suffragettes on her noticeboard.

All commented on her feminism. Although she is thoughtful and often quiet, she is never shy about speaking up when issues of equity, diversity, and feminism are at stake. Colleagues find her "very empowering", "caring, communicative, and incredibly generous with her time, with no sense of rank". She is collegiate, and can often be found in conversation with colleagues in the Russell Square café and what used to be called "Pizza Paradiso" (now, Olivelli) in Store Street. A leading member of the FCE book club, she showed herself to be a voracious reader with wide literary tastes – which was necessary since the club's avowed purpose was to "read difficult books"! Obviously, having to juggle so many things has meant that she is "incredibly organised". Unflustered, methodical, and possessing a strong sense of mission, she is utterly professional, modest about her own achievements, and exemplifies integrity. She is an "authentic feminist".

It will come as no surprise, therefore, that she is devoted to Birkbeck students, who reciprocate with love. Education, she knows, is key to social justice in a globalized world. Indeed, her extraordinary talents in teaching were acknowledged when she was awarded a prestigious

National Teaching Fellowship by the Higher Education Academy. Given the extremely competitive nature of these Fellowships, it is a key indicator of the quality of education that Birkbeck promotes.

In brief, then, Jackson is a textbook example of what lifelong education can do. In the words of Lorde's poem:

Some women wait for something
to change and nothing
does change
so they change
themselves.

In the book I mentioned at the beginning of this talk – Reconceptualising Lifelong Learning – Jackson and Burke express the hope that their work will be

a conversation that can be continued with us and without us: a conversation between those to whom lifelong learning matters.

This, I suggest, is exactly what Jackson has given to us here at Birkbeck.

As a Fellow of Birkbeck, we shall ensure that the conversation with her continues.